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Aspects of Gothic Fiction: A Study of Joyce Carol Oates' *Mysteries of Winterthurn*

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Abstract:

Gothic fiction is characterized by the elements of Suspense, Mystery and Horror. It travels through the darker side of human life and contained several recurring features like gloomy setting, neurotic characters, puzzling plot, archaic diction, complex narrative structure and so on. It is the exploration of the unknown and the unexplained that reveal the psychological state of the characters. Different aspects of the Gothic fiction and their interaction raise the mood of a gothic text. Even in the twenty-first century Gothic fiction continues to utilize its constant fascination with vampires and supernatural. Reading a gothic text is always a matter of individual perspective that how he/she interprets it as it gives interpretational freedom from inflexible approaches. The present paper traces different aspects of gothic fiction in the novel *Mysteries of Winterthurn* by Joyce Carol Oates, a well-known contemporary American gothic writer. The present novel is projected as a detective story, a genre which has many similar threads with Gothic fiction and which also works as an outstanding vehicle for the theme (Gothic). Three mysterious tales presented in the novel creates the atmosphere of horror and dread and as they remain unsolved till the end evoke the Gothic atmosphere simultaneously. The complexity of human personality, a modern gothic trait is deeply examined by the analysis of different characters.

Keywords: Gothic, Mystery, Atmosphere, Fragments.

The word 'Gothic' has various interpretations; it brings to mind a lot of things from architecture to vampire novels and so on. Originally, the term refers to Goths, an ancient barbaric Germanic tribe known for attacking Rome and then comes to mean a style of art produced in Europe from twelfth to sixteenth centuries. These invaders (Goths) immersed by Christianity brought an artistic sensibility; an extreme style, seemingly uncontrolled, larger than life different from the classical style which was subtle and controlled. It is most frequently associated with architecture, sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, stained glass, panel painting, textiles and jewelry produced in that period. Both Gothic sculpture and painting repeatedly depicted religious scenes and figures and the theme of transcendence in them. Gothic sculpture was normally used both in the exterior and the interior of the buildings. The main characteristics in the architecture included towers or spires, pointed arches, ribbed and fanned vaulted ceilings stained glass, buttresses etc. The vague for everything medieval led to the household objects like fans, clocks, candlesticks, fish- slices, covered with Gothic pattern and medieval ornamentation.

Actually the term 'Gothic' was never applied to these art forms until the era was over and with the arrival of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, everything medieval came to be seen as primitive and backward associated with superstition, feudalism and brutality. The term therefore used derisively until the eighteenth century when a renewed interest in everything medieval occurred. The gothic novel serves a strange fundamental human need for feeling afraid and the need to recollect links to the past in forms of medieval ballads, folk tales, superstitions, oral traditions, romance, epic, and legend all of which contained an element of supernatural. Gothic literature as its name implies takes its themes of darkness, sublimity, terror and confusion from gothic architecture, a style of buildings, popular in the middle ages.

Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) is generally regarded as the first gothic novel. Being a gothic novel the setting plays a role of almost the character in it. Ghosts, haunted castles, bleeding statues, helmet that crush the walls images of giant hands and feet take place in much of the novel's action. Walpole's imagination and invention set the field of the novel for years to come as this novel introduced the typical aspects of the genre i.e. stock characters, subterranean labyrinths, supernatural occurrences, most importantly an intricate plot and many more. Walpole's novel was soon followed by Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1797) Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Maturin's *Malmoth the Wanderer* (1820). The power of the Gothic continues to exert in its ongoing fascination with terror, horror, vampires, supernatural, and other things in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Several efforts were made to reconstruct the wonders of medieval existence. Medieval life was considered by many writers an offering of ideals of harmony and nobility where bonds of feudalism interconnected all together in a way which was not possible in their contemporary factory-based economy.

Contemporary Gothicists opine that reading Gothic Fiction is a matter of individual perspective and an issue of interpretation. Gothic texts may be analyzed in multiplicity and variety of perspectives which give interpretational freedom from inflexible approaches. There is always a dialogical relationship between the Gothic texts and the cultural, historical, social, political contexts in which Gothic tropes and archetypes survive.

The Gothic fiction has several elements. Regarding theme of a Gothic text, terror and Horror are the main elements. A character experiences terror in the expectation of some fearful event and experiences horror when the event actually happens. Exploring the ground between the appearance and reality is another important element of the gothic which leads to ambiguity. Confinement and the lack of escape cause the chilling claustrophobia. Justice and Injustice is another theme of a gothic text, apparently justice is absent from the world of gothic but on closer inspection it seems that compensations of sin and guilt stands firmly at the center of many gothic stories. The style of the Gothic novel includes setting, diction, narrative, and mood. Setting is the most important device which plays the role like a character in the work. Atmosphere in a gothic text is of mystery and suspense and the plot is built around a mystery such as a disappearance, unknown parentage etc. An ancient prophesy usually connected with the castle or its inhabitants. Omen, visions, supernatural and

otherwise inexplicable events occur in the particular setting. In Gothic texts, writer uses archaic and formal language in dialogues. Narrative structure of a gothic text is complex and complicated. Such construction gives overall work a dream quality and misleads the chronological and spatial development of the story.

Joyce Carol Oates is one of America's most creative and versatile contemporary writers. *Mysteries of Winterthurn*, by Oates is about mysteries that take place in Winterthurn city, as the title itself indicates. The real culprits never fetched to justice and this is the reason these mysteries persist mysterious. These unexplainable and uncommon murders create terror and fear; in this way give the novel its Gothic ambience. *Mysteries of Winterthurn* is projected as a detective story the elements of which are closely related to Gothic novels as both forms share so many traits. Oates, while holding many of the conventions of the Classic Gothic updates the Gothic genre by exposing transparent discrepancies, treats the novel ironically as a modern Gothic writer. *Mysteries of Winterthurn* deals with the complexities of the human personality which is again a contemporary gothic trait. Oates creates a fascinating story overloaded with ironic humor as she tenderly imitates a borrowed style and accomplishes to satirize that bygone style and its era with mild good humor. The story is decorated with suspense and mystery and Oates is a master at producing an atmosphere of dread. Her choice of the detective genre makes an outstanding vehicle for her theme; the gothic novel has been recognized as the forerunner of the modern mystery novel, it appropriates numerous gothic tropes. Most of the mystery novels are set in the gothic settings and structured around dark secrets connected with past. Both gothic and detective genre work in reverse order narratively to solve mysteries. The haunting atmosphere of the mystery novels echoes that of the gothic novel where the past confuses the present. Both genres focus on transgressing moral, psychological and societal boundaries.

The novel includes three tales, each carries with it different murders mysteries, the first is titled as "The Virgin in the Rose- Bower", the second, "Devil Half-Acre", and the third is, "The Bloodstained Bridal Gown." The novel both subverts and celebrates its form and presents these three tales that include themes of America, gender, race, God to describe fault line in the society to make one aware of inequity. Setting in the novel is fully realized city of Winterthurn against which background the main character Xavier, a detective tries to solve these murder mysteries and at the same time finds himself trapped in other supernatural mysteries. These murders in the Winterthurn and in its surrounding and the macabre events in the background of these murders give the novel Gothic atmosphere. Besides these actual murders mysteries in the novel, there are other elements also which give rise to the gothic environment to the story like some supernatural elements, obscene letters, slaughtered lambs, mummified babies, poisonings, a gloomy house with dark rooms, apparitions, ghosts, and other mysterious places. Thus there are a number of mysteries that need to be unraveled but nobody is able to solve them because of the horrified environment around them. In the novel Xavier, the protagonist plays a role of the detective and his appeal as a character gives the novel its perfect framework. Although, he being a detective believes in rational, believes in an ideal world in which criminal has to be punished and the crime has to be uncovered in order to bring back the harmony to the world. But he could not really solve the mysteries

because in each case he has a personal connection that's why he remains limited even in his victory. Xavier plays a role of detective which Oates has found both interesting and sympathetic. Xavier is determined, fascinating figure defined by powerful contradictions but at the same time a man of weaknesses.

The most terrifying event happens when Perdita, daughter of Erasmus Kilgarvan breaks the door of a room in the Manor and gets horrified to see the dreadful scene. Mrs. Abigail Whimbrel comes for a short stay with her infant son in Glen Mawr manor which belongs to her uncle, Erasmus Kilgarvan. The bed sheet is red because of the blood and the infant baby is lying dead as its throat, and the head have been eaten away. During the night Abigail experiences some unnatural creatures around her and hears some strange voices also but found nobody there. After some time she realizes that a little creature is sucking her breast, she knows very well that it could not be her son because it is too small to do this. She notices that the voices are coming from a wall painting in the room. She pushed away that creature and a number of monsters come around her calling her "cruel mother." It remains the mystery for everyone who has killed the baby mercilessly. And just few hours before this incident, another mysterious event happens when Georgina, Erasmus' elder daughter, cousin of Mrs. Abigail goes to buy quicklime early in the morning. She has been considered eccentric by people because of her strange habits. Mystery lies beneath the event that why she goes to buy quicklime only before some hours before the death of that baby.

The strange events not only happen in the Manor but the people around them also experience them outside the Manor. Mrs. Cutter one of the neighbors of Kilgarvans and her daughter notice a strange tiny creature with human face in their home a day before that infant's murder which arouses the interest of the mystery. In the cemetery at the time of mourning prayer of Erasmus Kilgarvan when everyone present in the mourning prayer hears loud haunting cries which fills everyone with terror. Nobody is able to understand the mystery behind the haunting cries. The death of Kilgarvan's servant and many more deaths are considered mysteries as all of them don't die naturally, they have been murdered and their mutilated bodies reveal that behind it some supernatural bodies are at work. Xavier Kilgarvan also belongs to this family but doesn't live with them in the manor because of some property disputes.

Xavier has detective extracts in him from his childhood and has been much interested in conducting different types of investigation in his teens. He with detective instincts is able to prove that the source of terror is something outside the soul when he comes to know that some lambs have been slaughtered in neighboring farm, he quickly reaches the sight. The other investigators are of the view that it is a work of some wild dogs or wolves because the bodies have been mutilated. When Xavier asks the farm keepers who could be the murderer they indicate towards Kilgarvans because that is the only place from beast may come. But Xavier due to his personal connection with that family favors them and assures them that Kilgarvans don't keep any beast in the Manor after the death of Abigail's son. Xavier while observing lambs' bodies comes to know that the lambs have been killed in the same manner of that infant by crumbling neck. While investigating dead lambs at the farm Xavier tumbles into a daydream which is the main element of the gothic fiction. He is forced to recall the last

night's dream which is of a lovely child that comes to his bed that child might be the infant son of Abigail. Then he hears strange voices murmuring him cousin. He gets frightened by the situation.

Xavier, with his detective passion enters curiously and secretly in the house because he was not allowed otherwise to investigate the murder mystery of Esdras. Erasmus Kilgarvan's brother Simon Esdrus' death remains mysterious also and he is murdered in the same manner as Abigail's son and also in the same room the so called Honeymoon room at his wedding night. His wife, Mrs. Murphy has gone mad after that incident and never recovers her sanity. Xavier in order to unravel the mystery enters the Honeymoon room and inspects the room quickly, he find nothing but the painting hanging on the wall of a virgin with a child encircled by a group of moving angels. Here again he feels some strange atmosphere around him and he constantly feels someone is breathing behind him. He again falls in a dreamlike situation where so many voices trying to uncloth him. This dreamlike state is used in gothic fiction to create confusion between the appearance and reality. He rubs his eyes to get over the dream and tries to think rationally but it looks like reality which cannot be denied. In this dreamy situation he also sees her mother blowing out the candle which symbolizes that his mother doesn't want him to investigate cases in the horrified atmosphere because she is worried about him. Xavier is frightened by the rough touch of the creatures, their ghost bite, and fleet kisses and touches on the thighs and a loud laughter that prevails in the room. After some time he gets back to the wakefulness and find himself alone in the room and the creatures look innocent in the painting and everything there is in calm state except the marks of bites on his body.

Despite of these terrifying events Xavier doesn't stop himself to investigate further. He goes to the attic to examine thinking devils might be hidden in the attic. He enters the attic and checks everything there. He gets stunned and his blood gets freeze by seeing three pair of mummified infants in each drawer. All the babies are killed in the same manner with a wire in their throat and before he could be able to understand the matter he receives a sharp crack on his head and falls into unconsciousness, Dr. says that it might be the attack of brain fever. He could not be able to recall what has happened in the attic during his investigation as he suffers from partial amnesia. After his illness for few weeks he recovers slowly and final able to remember the fragmented details of his experience at the attic. He recalls when he was lying on the floor of attic in an unconscious state, he sees there veiled Georgina in the mourning dress collecting the babies to bury them using quicklime. Xavier is not sure whether she is Georgina or only his hallucination. But now there are no mummified babies in the attic. Then again it is also a mystery that after the self- destruction of Georgina, unnatural happenings have stopped in the Manor. The narrator of the story at times says that detective aspires to invent what is already exists and in this way align the detective to an artist creating an internal world to better understand the external. The sense of moral standard and the certainty of detective fiction are imposed on the confusing material. The idea is that truth will definitely emerge from contradictory evidences. But Xavier reveals no truth behind the matter whatever may be the reason behind that the main reason might be his personal relationship with the culprit. There may be two possibilities; one is that Xavier is telling the

truth and the other is he is hiding the one and the latter is not justifiable because of his profession. He must not hide the things being a detective. There are clues which the reader is able to put together and reach the conclusion but Xavier is shown that he learns about the clues through persistent hard work. And because of Xavier's approach towards crime nobody is sure exactly what happened.

The second episode of the novel, "Devil's Half Acre" also contains mysteries and murders in the eerie atmosphere of the place. The place is also known as Bishop's Half Acre as a bishop, Fenwick roams around the area. The name itself signifies the prevailing mysteries and disorder in the place. Xavier comes to know that five dead bodies of young girls have found in that area and he takes it as another challenge. People used to believe about the place that the bishop has some connection with the devil or he himself is a devil. The bishop is hanged by a mob when he is charged with abducting a child and his skin is peeled and used in manufacturing some products. Whether the city, Winterthurn has been described a fully realized city with clergy, police officer and bars but the city itself is more than a backdrop to the murders. The powers within the city and the community of the Winterthurn use violence for its own ends where a brutal murder becomes the justification of some supernatural occurrences. Then it is believed that the area is haunted by the spirits of the bishop and the boy. The dead bodies are found in the same area so that it is expected that the reason behind these murders might be their roaming souls.

The story of mystery around the crimes that Xavier investigates may be seen as the distractions from the real and the ever-present crimes of society. The murders are the product of stresses within the society where repression comes out in violence. The murder of the Eva Teal is believed to be a ritual murder by investigators as the small cross is placed on her tongue after murdering her. It is believed that the murder is implemented by Jews against the Christian. She has been killed brutally by twisting tightly around her neck. Two persons are suspected, first is Rosenwald, the manager where Eva Teal had been working and the second is Valentine Westergaard who is seen with her a day before the incident. Mr. Shearwater, the police officer collects evidences that Rosenwald is deeply involved with Eva and it is he, being a Jew who has done this crime of murdering an innocent Catholic girl. The district Solicitor is also convinced that he is the murderer of all the five girls. Xavier on the other hand is not ready to agree with the investigators' point of view that Rosenwald could be the murderer. He tells the officers that he is accused only because he is a Jew. Xavier starts his enquiry in Eva Teal's workplace, and then he manages to meet Rosenwald in the prison and assures him that he has come there to support him and he is not a media person so that he can tell him whatever he knows about the case. Rosenwald tells Xavier everything and says that he has belief in court system. Valentine Westergaard is another suspect who is considered to be the real murderer. Besides those girls he is also believed to be the murderer of Molly, an orphan girl who has been working in his house. After knowing about the death of Molly, his grandfather asks him about it and he manipulates the matter by saying that for a long time she has been following him and when he accepts her honestly she elopes with other boy. And some days before he has been called by her in forest and she blackmails him if he does not accept her she will consume poison and she did exactly the same and dies. His grandfather

believes him but Xavier is suspicious about this story. Xavier is of the opinion that many unnatural deaths are taken as natural and in that case the real culprit is simply left and not even suspected. He decides to examine the place of murder as well as Valentine's place. While examining Devil's Half- Acre he gets frightened as he knows that Valentine sensed his suspicion on him. He might kill him also anytime. This sense of terror is always present behind the scene in a gothic text. Meanwhile he falls into a hallucination in which he sees Valentine is staring at him. Suddenly he comes back to his senses and thinks that Valentine can only attack helpless girls. While investigating his house he also manages to see Valentine sitting on the sofa and calling him a detective of great genius and also fancies that Valentine attacks him with a knife.

The hallucinations and unusual dreams are common elements of Gothic literature. At Devil's Half Acre and in Valentine's house Xavier gets these unusual dreams which enforce the theme of the novel. Xavier happens to see a glove in the muck at the site of investigation. Without wasting a single moment sensing that it could serve as evidence he goes in the muck to collect that glove. After that he realizes that it is quicksand and he is now entrapped in it. He tries hard but fails to get out of there. Because of these scenes filled with fear and terror the novel is more gothic novel than a detective one. Most of the important scenes of the novel are the main and crucial scenes of a ghost story; the secret passages, disintegrating mansion, the revelation of the horror after coming into contact with near death experience in the muck etc. He curses himself for this error in haste. It is again a great mystery that how he comes out from the dangerous situation, who might have helped him in that barren place. There might be someone who is following him. It might take much struggle to get him out of that muck. This is the mystery and remains mystery till the end.

Revenge is another key element of Gothic fiction. It is shown in the murder of Rosenwald by Jericho of brethren and the murder of Quaker couple by a Negro servant and again the revenge is taken against the servant by white people. The Negro servant is brutally killed by white people and his spirit is believed to be roaming around Water Street and the brutal murder of Rosenwald by Jericho of Brethren is also a cruel deed. After murdering him in the cell that group leave the impression that he has committed the suicide. When the state solicitor questions on the murder he is replied that it is impossible to identify who are the murderers among nine- tenths of Winterthurn city. Everyone is implicated in violence. And this is why Xavier's cases end with a gloomy sense that justice is an illusion. By Xavier serious efforts to investigate the murder and his collection of evidences, a month after the other suspect Valentine is arrested by the police. Xavier with the help of the families of victims attempted to exhume the corpses again. It is believed that the eyes of all the girls reveal the ghostly picture of Valentine in them. In his house also Xavier finds many evidences against him that signify only he can be the murderer. Xavier found the murder weapon also in the drawer which is the same weapon he has seen in the dream at Devil's Half Acre. The trial against Valentine is started in court. Many witnesses including Colin Kialgarvan, Xavier's brother reveal that Valentine is innocent. Valentine says that he is forced by the spirit of bishop who compelled him to do this crime. He doesn't even know that how the bodies used to transport from my place to Devil's Half Acre. He says that Colin used

to get him girls and he probably sent the body to that area after sacrifices. He says that roaming bishop is really responsible for the murders. The judge is moved by the story and declares he is not guilty at all. Xavier regrets that in order to put Valentine on the scaffold he has brought Colin to the target. To be a part of the society is to bear the guilt of society's crimes; to be complicit. It indicates that God and Satan are the one and in this way the judge and the criminal are not to be differentiated. Thus, however he has solved the case but gets himself trapped in that.

The third tale in the novel is titled as "The Blood-stained Bridal Gown" and contains so many gothic elements in it as demonic possession, excesses, incest, murders etc. The novel is full of secrets and the gothic effect is enhanced by keeping many secrets as secrets till the end of the novel. There are total three murders in this particular episode; the murders of Perdita's husband, Harmon Bunting, her mother in law Letitia Bunting and Mrs. Amanda Poindexter alleged girlfriend of Perdita's husband. In one scene, Letitia Bunting is writing a letter sitting in front of a mirror and suddenly she sees his son's image in the mirror who is silently coming in the room and when she asks him why he is coming silently he calls her to him and when she turns around to see what is going on there is nothing then she thinks that he has seen a ghost but at once she stops herself articulating this because her son is alive. Having disturbed by the situation she goes to church to check if everything is right. As she opens the door of the church she gets frightened by the spectacle; the dead bodies of her son and a lady lying in the intimate position on bed. As soon as she is able to understand this a strange voice occur and as she turns back a sharp attack hit her on forehead and she also dies on the spot.

It is believed by people that there are roaming spirits around the Grace Church Cemetery. People usually hear strange voices from the pond. Perdita and Letiteia also hear these voices many times. But Harmon Bunting has all kinds of scientific theories to prove all this happenings fake. Perdita also complains several times that she has seen horrific spectral face and also hears strange voices. But Harmon always excuses this by saying that it must be a thief, factory worker or someone else. After these three murders supernaturalism overcomes those people who have seen a red- haired man holding a blood stained ax. Many people witness him running with that ax. A child notices him throwing his ax into the pond and disappearing in the mist. The news spread that three dead bodies have been discovered in the church and the same murderer has also sexually abused Perdita in her home. People gossips that the murderer might be Ellery Poindexter who must have known about the adulterous relationship between Harmon and Mrs. Poindexter. But in police investigation a cap is found which is revealed to be of Jabez Dovokie and with the presence of this evidence at that place he is identified as the red- haired man, the murderer.

Xavier reaches Winterthurn after receiving an unnamed letter about these murders and comes to know that Perdita also underwent many sufferings at the hands of the murderer. Xavier suspects Ellery Poindexter as the real culprit and meets Jabez Dovokie in the cell, the poor man embraces him tightly and falls down dead as he has been beaten by police officers from the day they captured him and his death has been affirmed natural. Xavier decides to unravel the evil doings of Poindexter, he comes to know that he has an illegitimate child and

also has so many mistresses and definitely he is not a man of good reputation. When Ellery Poindexter comes to know that Xavier is investigating against him, he attacks him, but by chance he himself dies of a heart attack on the spot. But Xavier comes to know by all the investigation that he might not be the murderer because Poindexder has been deceiving his wife also. Gradually by examining the note which has been sent to him at his place he comes to know about the real murderer. At the end he marries Perdita and leaves his profession by saying that it is not a profession for a married man.

Xavier as a fine detective solves each case with brilliance. However it doesn't lead him to a personal triumph but to recognition of the limits of his authority. Xavier's solutions always present a dilemma: if he triumphantly solves the case, at the same time betrays those he loves by exposing their complexity in crime. Like in first case he must identify Geogina as the murderer as he finds out the mystery behind the curse of the honeymoon room but in this sense he betrays Perdita, his love, as well as Kilgarvans. However the truth is disgusting he finally burns his notes keeping the exposure from the world. In the next case he must identify Valentine Westergaard as the real murderer and in this way betrays his own brother who is revealed as valentine's accessory. To solve his final case he must identify the woman he still loves as the ax- murderer. Though Xavier has all the qualities of a genius detective he lacks in one that is his personal attitude towards his cases from which a detective should remain apart while solving any kind of mystery.

The novel is a mixture of the two genres- Mystery and Gothic. By introducing mysterious events in the novel the writer is able to create ambiguity. Many kinds of mysteries are incorporated and it has been left on the readers to put together the scattered hints. The mystery genre definitely seems to have encouraged the writer to new height of complexity and ambiguity which give rise to the gothic ambience in the novel. There are no open and shut cases but the doubts are present in each and every case; the doubts about guilt and who did what and whether Xavier himself has done the right thing or is himself polluted with culpability.

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